AFRAID OF EASTER?
Mark 16:1-8
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It had not occurred to them, apparently, that he might not be there; that the tomb might be open and the body gone. They had not roused themselves from sleep before dawn in order to be witnesses to a resurrection. To the contrary, they went to the tomb to complete some unfinished business. Jesus of Nazareth had been taken down from the cross hurriedly. The Sabbath was approaching and the Romans knew that Jewish sensitivities would be offended by public executions which extended into that sacred time. So the guards had finished the job, removed the body from the cross, turned it over to one of his friends and stationed a few men at the tomb.

Because Sabbath commenced at sundown on Friday his friends hadn't time to perform customary ablutions. There were oils and spices to annoint the body. It was proper and right that his body should receive traditional treatment. So, they were up before dawn in order to do their work as soon as Sabbath was over, with the first rays of sun, on the first day of the week.....

It had not occurred to them, apparently, that the tomb might be empty. When that turned out to be the case they reacted predictably; with consternation, bewilderment, distress and finally fear. It is very clear. The earliest, unadorned account tells it straight. The empty tomb didn't prove a thing. All it did was scare the first witnesses half to death.

That, it seems to me, is what happens to many of us every Easter morning. We come to church knowing about what to expect: the same heroic three hymns we have sung since childhood, the same story, essentially the same sermon we've heard thirty or forty times before adorned with a new set of timely illustrations even as we are adorned with a new coat and shoes. We come knowing what to expect. Sometime during the course of the morning we're going to put our gray matter to work on the problem. Like the women heading for the tomb to tidy things up, you and I head out to church Easter Sunday to tidy up some potentially embarrassing problems. What really happened? Are we really supposed to believe that a dead body got up and walked away? Or can we invest a little intellectual creativity in the project and conclude things with a safe metaphor? What was resurrected, perhaps, was not a person, a being, - but a set of principles, right? What Easter is all about is the deathless truth of the Sermon on the Mount and the reinvigoration of the world in the Springtime.

But it doesn't quite fit. There isn't any serious doubt that one Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Roman authorities as a trouble maker. There is no doubt that his friends became convinced that he did not stay dead. Nor is there any serious doubt that for nineteen centuries men and women have experienced his love and power in a way that convinced them that he is magnificently present in the world. That is fact. What doens't fit at all is the suggestion that resurrection is a metaphor for undying principles. What doesn't fit my analytical ability is the suggestion that his disillusioned followers sat around and concocted a story about a

ressurection and then went out and died for it.

And suddenly the well-structured, predictable Easter morning comes a little unglued - just as it did for that coterie of mourners in the early light of dawn. Madeline L'Engle writes:

> "Easter.....It is almost too brilliant for me to contemplate, it is like looking directly into the sun; I am burned and blinded by life."
> (The Irrational Season, p. 99)

The customs which have attached themselves to the celebration of the event, frankly, seem to be designed to insulate us, distract us, almost to protect us from that original fear. Someone, I suppose, ought to celebrate the reproductive power of life and the coming of Spring. Eggs and rabbits are old, venerable symbols of fertility and the process of reproduction, upon which quite a bit depends. It is not what Easter celebrates, however.

The first witnesses were afraid. And well they might be. We have always feared the unknown, the unpredictable, but at a deeper level, human beings have always experienced something like fear whenever they sensed the nearness of the Holy, the other, the divine. That's what the women experienced at the empty tomb. Not fear of threat or harm, but elemental fear - awe - in the presence of the inexplicable, the holy.

The Bible consistently tells it that way. When God acts, the people who perceive it become fearful. At the birth in Bethlehem, an angel appears to shepherds and says: "Fear not." When Jesus healed a man possessed by an evil spirit, the man's neighbors became frightened. There is a fear which occurs when something happens outside the boundaries of our understanding. Curiously it is science that is teaching us a new appreciation for the experience. Charles Darwin wrote about "that feeling of awe, of dread, of the holy playing upon nature." Albert Einstein observed that "a conviction akin to religious feeling lies behind all scientific work of a high order." (see Loren Eisely, The Star Thrower, p. 187ff, "Science and the Sense of the Holy") And the late Loren Eisely wrote eloquently about the feeling of elation but also hair-raising awe when a scientist in a laboratory discovers something new and unexpected about the world.

The women who found the tomb empty were afraid and this is the fear it was: the awe in the presence of the Holy; the disturbing, frightening sense that there are possibilities we haven't thought of; that the system is not closed; that what we assumed we knew about reality and life and death, may not be the final word at all. That is what the first witnesses experienced and that is what disrupts these otherwise predictable Easter mornings in church.

The theological issue is the most basic one of all. The more I think about it the more convinced I become of that. If there is a God, the resurrection makes all the sense in the world. St. Paul wrote it that way twenty centuries ago to some

skeptics in Corinth. But the issue is still sharp. Hans Kung puts it dramatically: "Either I die into nothingness...or I die into that absolute last reality which is, then, the absolute first, the incomprensible most real reality which we call God." (Does God Exist?, p. 678) It's no wonder we try to celebrate it with Fruit and Nut Eggs and Jelly Beans!

A little later Kung tries again...."Resurrection means a life that bursts through the dimensions of time and space in God's invisible, imperishable, incomprehensible domain," (ibid.) But it was the author L'Engle who said it best, I thought: "...the joyful God of love, who shouted the galaxies into existence is not going to abandon any iota of his creation." (op. cit. p. 108)

The idea is present in the life of God's people centuries earlier. Isaiah's magnificent dream of the day of the Lord, with its rich banquet on the mountain, its dried tears and banished death, its veil removed from the human race, is an ancient whisper of a promise which, in Jesus Christ, becomes a shout. Death is vanquished. Death has no more power. There is nothing to fear. The God who called us into being will not abandon us to death.

That is very good news by the way, because most of our lives are lived in what looks like the shadow of a cross. That cross is all the evidence you need to prove that evil is real and life can be very unfair and goodness isn't always profitable. We try, sometimes, to live by an opposite set of rules. We try to assume that life is essentially fair; that good people are rewarded and evil people punished. We try to live on the assumption that hard work will always produce success, that honesty pays, that love and forgiveness and affection are, ultimately, good investments.

That's why the crucifixion was so crushing, so devastating, to the friends of Jesus. How in the world could something so cruel, so evil, so unfair happen to this good man? For some of them, the very fact of crucifixion resolved the issue. God's Messiah would not end up like this. It made no sense whatever to talk about God's son on a cross. "Foolishness," smart people said. "Blasphemy," religious people said. William Willimon, in a recent Christian Century editorial told about an Episcopal church in Georgia which decided to observe Lent by erecting three, plain, rough crosses on the church lawn. There were many complaints from neighbors. The crosses, they said, made the neighborhood look bad. The early Christians had trouble with it and so do we. We's like to assume that resurrections aren't necessary because crucifixions don't happen. We'd prefer Easter as eggs and rabbits and flowers rather than death becoming life. In the same editorial Willimon writes about Easter morning: "No one gets in who wasn't here Friday." What he means, of course, is that the Resurrections of Jesus Christ makes sense, is good news, and has power, only in light of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Much of life, after all, when we let our guard down a bit, looks like Good Friday. It is not always fair. Goodness is not always rewarded and hard work does

not always result in success. Sometimes goodness fails. Sometimes goodness appears to be weak. That's the philosophic quandry, of course. The form of it we usually encounter is far more immediate: Leukemia, for instance. Premature dying, debilitating disease, young men killed in meaningless wars. In Dostoevski's novel The Idiot, Prince Myshkin, looks at a particularly graphic picture of the crucifixion and says, "Why, that picture might make some people lose their faith."

A little closer to home, Archie Bunker and his agnostic son-in-law were arguing fiercely about religion.

> Mike says: "Archie, if there is a God, why is there so much suffering in the world?"
> Archie responds: "I'll tell you why....Edith, if there is a God, why is there so much suffering in the world?"
> An awkward silence follows and Archie shouts..."Edith, would you get in here and help me? I'm having to defend God all by myself."

Or Woody Allen, who wonders about these matters too, once quipped: "It's not that God is cruel. It's just that God is an underachiever." (Christian Century, 4/7/82, p. 397)

Reality is Good Friday. Reality is a starving child, a widow, a disappointed executive, a failed student, a bankrupt business.

But when the women arrived the tomb was open and Jesus was not there and they were afraid. Afraid that it was true: afraid that the most unthinkably, unspeakably good event had actually happened? Resurrection means that although Good Friday is reality, it is not the final reality: that though suffering, starvation, disease and war are real, there is one thing more real. Crucifixion means that God participates fully in our humanity. Resurrection means that what we regard as the final word is not. We do not, in Hans Kung's words, die into nothingness. We, and those we love, die into God who is beginning and end, Alpha and Omega.

The empty tomb is not sufficient proof. It was not sufficient for those who discovered it. In fact, the first witnesses were scared out of their wits. What convinced the friends of Jesus that he was not dead, was the experience of his presence. Down through the centuries, rational arguments have not persuaded countless millions of people to believe: what was persuasive was the experience of resurrection, the sense of victory in the face of defeat, life in the face of death, confidence in despair which has characterized the Christian Community for more than 19 centuries.

Karl Barth was the most influential theologian of our era. The best thing Barth ever said about the resurrection, however, was not in his twelve volume Church Dogmatics, but in a phone conversation with an old friend, shortly before Barth died. They talked about the wretched state of the world, the widening gap between East and West, Rich and Poor. They talked about the increase in violence and nuclear weapons and terrorism all over the world. When they had recited the entire familiar litany they began to lament their own advancing years, loss of hearing, eyesight,

vitality and the nuisance of arthritis and their aches and pains. And finally, Barth began to laugh. "Cheer up, Edward," he said, "Christ still reigns."

The words, finally, bend and break, under the load we have placed upon them. So may it be affirmed, this most magnificent reality, in gentle, modest gestures this day. If words refuse to bear the weight, may it be expressed among us in a squeeze of the hand, an embrace, a silent knowing together that on this day we deal with a truth far bigger than our understanding. May the Resurrection be affirmed and celebrated in the three heroic hymns, the same old sermon, even the eggs and bunnies and flowers - and then silence: the silence of those who know they have been in the presence of the Holy God, the beginning and the end. May it be celebrated in the laughter of those who have looked at death and are no longer afraid, and in the love and kindness and gentleness of those who have seen it together.

> "Do not be afraid. You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is not here. He has Risen."

AMEN.

We confess, O God, that we are comfortable with predictability. We confess not only our inability to believe, but our occasioned unwillingness. Forgive us. Give us, this day, new love, new faith, new hope - new courage to affirm with our whole being, the victory of life over death in the resurrection of Jesus our Lord who with you and the Holy Spirit, reigns - now and forever.

AMEN.